

# Into the Great Unknown: Strategies for Early-Career Teachers

## Part 2: Planning Routines and Teaching Procedures

by Kendra Taylor and Olivia Salzman-Coon

The early years of teaching music can feel exhausting. In our professional experience, student teachers often remark about the amount of energy needed to teach for a full day. While teaching music is a job that requires a lot of energy and focus, some techniques and strategies can maximize your rehearsal engagement and protect your energy. This series of columns is inspired by our presentation to early-career teachers at the 2024 Northwestern ACDA Regional Conference. Part one focused on planning and organizing your program and strategies for classroom management (*Choral Journal*, August 2024). In part two, we will outline methods for designing routines, delivering instruction, and crafting long-term structures so you are less worn out at the end of the day and can sustain a healthy career as a choral educator. We will also include a practical instruction checklist so you can self-reflect on your teaching.

**Challenge: Help! My rehearsals are wearing me out! I need to find a way to plan my rehearsals that feels sustainable.**

**Solution One: Identify aspects of teaching and rehearsing that are tiring and design routines to support those areas.**

Establishing a routine for your classes in the early

years of teaching seems daunting; and because rehearsals are subject to so many variables, no one can give you a foolproof routine without knowing you, your students, and your instructional goals. However, the tools offered in this article should help you develop a system for reflection on what you would like to do to strengthen your lesson structuring and how to design a routine around those goals.

Routines allow you to create a predictable environment for both you and your students. Trauma-informed pedagogy suggests that routines and predictability can help students feel more at ease and empowered in a classroom.<sup>1</sup> The three steps we rely on to design a routine are: (1) designing daily and event-based routines with consideration to context, (2) reflecting on what our routines may (or may not) be achieving after trying them out, and (3) applying effective aspects of routines to multiple situations with our students.

### 1. Designing Routines

Routines should support one of three priorities in your classroom: 1) the needs of your students, 2) the lesson objectives and goals you're addressing in your lesson, and 3) your needs. When designing routines, anything to which you plan to dedicate time should contribute to one of these goals. At the start of a new year, term, or concert cycle, sit down with a sheet of paper divided into

three columns and label them “for the students,” “for me,” and “for our goals/objectives” and make time to brainstorm what is most important for your upcoming time together. This can inform what you choose to include in your daily rehearsals. For example, if rehearsals are wearing you out, you may want to have section leaders handling warm-ups. This could be listed in your “for me” column since it supports your needs. It could also be listed in any of the other columns since it will allow students to become more independent musicians and give you a chance to assess proper technique and instructional needs without also conducting warm-ups. An idea that lands in all three columns is a strong choice to support your routine! See Table 1 on the next page for routine brainstorming examples.

## 2. Applying Routines

Throughout the process of routine design, you will stumble upon techniques that work well enough to become institutional knowledge, or routines that will endure across all classes you work with at your school for years to come. Consider explicitly stating these routines in your syllabus, handbook, and other program-specific documents. This will help create a predictable environment for new students enrolling and parents/guardians, as well as returning students participating in trips, concerts, festivals, and other big events. See a list of suggested long-term routines below.

### *Concert routine:*

- Make call times a set amount of time before curtain (e.g., always 1 hour before curtain no matter what call time is) and make a set rule for when students can leave the event.
- Compile a list of specific items that students will clean up and/or be responsible for.
- Make a set list of expectations for concert attire.
- Plan for transportation options going home and track who is able to drive alone, ride with other peers’ parents, or otherwise leave events without their own family.

- What is the plan for students who cannot go home after school prior to the concert? Consider allowing students to stay in your room, securing chaperones, and providing food.
- Possibly provide dinner or snacks to students.
- Have facilitators to help you (teachers, parents/guardians, and/or student leaders to help with sound checks, monitoring spaces, and serving dinner if it is provided).

### *Checkout routine:*

- Decide if you charge for folders/concert outfits (remember to consider if this possibly excludes some students).
- Set a date that music will be due back. If you penalize late returns, set deadlines and amounts before the due date so there are clear consequences.
- Ask other teachers in your building who also check out equipment what their routines and policies are. This can help you adhere to a clear building-wide policy if possible.

## **Solution Two: Adjust the delivery of your instruction to protect your energy while still giving quality feedback in an engaging environment.**

Finding the correct teacher-talk-time ratio in your own classroom can be challenging. As a new educator, you may still be learning how to give directions that are clear, concise, and efficient. Direct instruction is explicit, systematic (sequenced), and delivered in the fewest possible steps.<sup>2</sup> By working to talk more efficiently, we can increase student engagement. If students are waiting their turn to participate there may be off-task behavior, so we want to engage students in “doing” as fast as possible. Masterful teachers find ways to have students actively engaged at all times (ex. turn listening to the directions into a game/activity/assignment, engaging a section that isn’t singing in a music listening/evaluation task). You can also increase engagement by

**Table 1. Routine Brainstorming Example**

For the Students	For Me	For Our Objectives/Goals
<b>Assign “home base” spots to all students.</b> This helps with attendance, but it also allows students to visualize their learning space ahead of time and enter the room with a destination in mind.	<b>Create daily clean-up routines.</b> It is a group environment with a group-made mess. What fun! It is okay to set the expectation that everyone cleans up after themselves and helps you ready the room for the next class.	<b>Provide instructional support every day.</b> Giving out IPA charts, posting anchor charts, or providing other supports can help students answer their own questions in the same predictable spots and address challenges independently.
<b>Set entrance/exit expectations for students.</b> This could be exit ticket tasks, collecting folders and chairs, signing in on the class log, or anything else important to ensure students are accounted for and the room is ready for learning/the next class. It also signals to the students it’s time to get started and helps everyone anticipate what the start and end of class should look like every day.	<b>Minimize your roles.</b> Give the class the tools to address their own needs and try tasks as an ensemble utilizing their past knowledge/skills to address new musical challenges. This can include having rotating student leaders take the student through warm-ups daily, having students listen to recordings of themselves and give themselves feedback for improvement, having bathroom breaks self-managed through a sign-out sheet, or reference materials (like IPA charts and extra scores) freely available for students to reference when they have questions about their parts. <sup>3</sup>	<b>Have some extra supplies on hand daily.</b> Think about what extra supplies are needed on hand to avoid days when students forget materials. This also allows the student to address their needs without your help.
<b>Project the daily class plan on the board.</b> This allows students to come into their assigned spot, review the plan for the day, and prepare themselves independently.	<b>Find a building mentor.</b> Who can watch you teach and give you feedback in a low-stakes manner? Plan a regular interval of time to meet and jot questions down as you think of them.	<b>Consult IEP and 504s when planning.</b> All lessons should be created with accessibility in mind. Don’t try to fix troubles after the fact, but design lesson structuring early to allow for a universal learning design. See Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines. <sup>4</sup>
<b>Set behavior expectations/consequences early.</b> This depersonalizes consequences by sharing them before misbehaviors happen. Then when consequences are given, students know ahead of time what to expect and you can avoid unnecessary power struggles.	<b>Learn the daily routine of your students.</b> Are you immediately before lunch? After PE? Across campus from their previous class? Don’t try to struggle against students’ daily lives without understanding them. If you spot a challenge, brainstorm solutions with fellow teachers and students. This builds rapport and saves your energy.	<b>Document everything!</b> This will allow you to spot patterns in your behavior or in student behavior based on activity, assessment style, or other factors. Journal 1-2 sentences or a short bullet-point list about each class daily in a Word document.

appropriately “switching gears.” You want to monitor how much time you are spending on an activity and not spend too much time on one aspect of rehearsal.

Want to challenge yourself and have fun in the process? Play the “Rule-of-7” game with your class. The goal of the game is to tell your choir what you want them to do in seven words or less.<sup>5</sup> You can only say seven words, then the students must do something (e.g., a musical task). If you go over seven words and students have not done something to participate, have someone ring a bell or play a fun noise on a phone to cut you off. At that point, students must do something before you can talk again (e.g., sing a passage, clap a rhythm, etc.). Dr. Sharon Paul from the University of Oregon has done this exercise with graduate conductors using a ten-word limit.

### *Feedback cycle:*

We need to make sure we are giving clear goals, instructions, and feedback to engage students. We want to aim to teach in feedback cycles:

- 1) Teacher instruction
- 2) Student task
- 3) Teacher feedback on that task

In order to be efficient, you may find you are speaking in bullet points instead of prose. We encourage you to give one goal at a time (that you can effectively assess—i.e., see them do something, hear it, write it). For example:

- 1) “Sing m. 1-8 and snap on all final consonants.”
- 2) Students sing and snap (can visually assess who does/doesn’t know where to place the consonants).
- 3) Give feedback specific to the goal. Avoid the urge to speak about all that just happened; stick to your stated goal.

At this point, you can continue with your first goal or

pivot to something new. But be sure to close your feedback cycles before moving on. Also, be mindful of your goals and feedback. Are you always asking for goals related to dynamics or rhythm? You might consider placing a choral evaluation rubric/scale nearby while you listen to your ensemble. By looking at those categories (tone, intonation, vowel uniformity, rhythm precision, phrasing, etc.), you will be inspired to create goals and provide feedback in more areas.

### *Instruction delivery checklist:*

The checklist below will help you to monitor your delivery of instruction. You can use this tool as your lesson plan or as a self-assessment tool (video record your lesson and fill out the form after). You can also invite a trusted mentor to your classroom to fill out this form as you teach. See what patterns arise and use this as a guide in your own professional development.

### **Delivery of Instruction Rubric**

*Note: this list is based upon course content created by Dr. Melissa Brunkan. It has been modified and included with permission.*

#### *Content:*

- An introduction (related to goal)
- A closure (related to goal/review)
- Clear goals that are observable/measurable & specific (student-friendly language)
- An assessment task that accurately assesses the goal. For example, if you are interested in knowing how accurately students can label notes on a staff, do not grade them based upon a concert performance, but rather an activity that required them to label notes. Ask yourself, “Can my student be successful at this task using my targeted assessment skill alone?”
- A hands-on activity (i.e., not lecture, not just written tasks) that applies the concept being taught (can also be used to assess student learning—something you can see/hear them do). This could be as simple as asking students

to snap on all rests in a piece of music or utilizing Curwen/Glover hand gestures to reinforce melodic lines.

- Scaffolding: logical/appropriate sequence of activities to get from prior knowledge to goal
- Culturally responsive/relevant element

*Delivery:*

- Preparation (ex. completed slides, materials, knows plan, know the music, score study, purposeful warmups linked to goals for the day)
- Pacing/energy/active participation (students always have a task, not too long on one thing)
- Clear/efficient verbal communication: teacher talk is minimal but specific, with minimal pause words, mini-

mal thinking silence, age-appropriate language

- Clear/respectful nonverbal communication
- Teacher/professional disposition

*Communication:*

- Feedback loops (specific goal presented—students do it—feedback on goal)
- Specific/appropriate feedback on musical concepts
- Specific/appropriate feedback on behavior (classroom management)
- Modeling and instrument skills (singing, playing, hand signs)

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- Conducting/song leading (starting/stopping music, leading music/rhythms)

*Reflect upon the following when you watch a video of your teaching:*


- Are you making eye contact (equally amongst all students)?
- Is the tone/volume of your vocal delivery engaging? (as opposed to monotone and one volume)
- What do your facial expressions look like? (positive and encouraging vs. disapproving)
- Are you engaging your body? (For example: walking around the room as opposed to sitting at the piano for most of class, matching your physical alignment to what you'd like to see in your singers, using nonverbal communication that reinforces your verbal directions)

### 3. Reflecting on Routines

Once you've attempted to employ your routines for a substantial amount of time, reflect on the challenges and successes. Are you able to clearly see the benefit of the tasks you employ regularly? Are you still facing challenges at some point in your lesson? Has your energy level increased? Be vulnerable with yourself and decide what needs further improvement. Improvement is a lifelong task. There is no need to feel shame or disappointment if something doesn't work out. That just means you are one step closer to finding the solution. If possible, bring your routine and ongoing challenges to a building mentor or a music mentor in your district/area and ask for their input. After your first attempt at routine design, you can bring invaluable knowledge of your students and classroom culture to this conversation.

### Conclusions

We hope you are inspired to reflect on your classroom routines, delivery or instruction, and can find ways to refine your teaching with an eye to conserving

your energy. While self-reflection can be challenging and time consuming on the front end, in the long run it will enable you to better serve students and help yourself feel more empowered and energized at the end of a day of teaching. We hope you have fun in the process. Happy planning! 

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tom Brunzell, "Trauma-Aware Practice and Positive Education" in Margaret L. Kern and Michael L. Wehmeyer (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Education* (Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature, 2021): 205–23. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64537-3\_8

<sup>2</sup> Jean Stockard, Timothy W. Wood, Cristy Coughlin, and Caitlin Rasplika Khoury, "The effectiveness of direct instruction curricula: A meta-analysis of a half century of research," *Review of Educational Research* 88, no. 4 (2018): 479–507.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to consider when you will allocate time to prep your student leaders with this end goal in mind. Consider utilizing leadership camp opportunities to accomplish this.

<sup>4</sup> CAST, Inc., The UDL guidelines. <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Charlene Archibeque, "Making rehearsal time count," *Choral Journal* 33, no. 2 (1992): 18–19.